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**Serving Southern New England**

# Providence Business News

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# Hispanic population making its mark in Providence

By Jason Perez-Dormitzer  
Contributing Writer

There have been bodegas in Providence for a while, but they were hard to find.

Bernardo Sanchez, who opened Bodega Sanchez Market in 1984 on Broad Street, remembers a time when there were only a handful of other businesses like his. The Dominican population would flock to his small store to buy items like tamarindos, mangos, sodas and other goods imported from their native land.

But a boom in the Hispanic population in Providence has changed all that.

According to the 2000 census, immigrants from Guatemala, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic accounted for a 100 percent increase in the Hispanic population in Providence since 1990.

Now, there are bodegas all over Broad Street serving a growing Dominican population.

"Before it was a little bit better. Now I have a lot of competition," Sanchez said.

The growth of the Hispanic population has helped Providence become the second largest city in New England, surpassing Worcester. Since 1990, Providence saw an 8 percent increase in the number of residents, which stands at 172,618.

The Hispanic population is the dominant ethnicity in some parts of the city and for the first time, minori-

ties make up the majority of the city populace. The non-Hispanic white population has fallen by almost 25 percent and Hispanics now make up nearly a third of the population.

Patrick McGuigan, executive director of Providence Plan, an initiative designed to address the fundamental causes of poverty and urban decline, said he is happy to see the increase in population. It is a sign that Providence is an attractive place to live.

"With the census data and the mall, for instance, the perception is that this is a city on the move," he said.

However, he knows that there will be challenges ahead as well. The city has a shrinking manufacturing industry that is giving way to a growing number of other businesses, particularly in the technology field.

Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline recently unveiled a plan that calls for a "creative economy" aimed at keeping students working in the city after graduating from institutions like Brown University.

This would mean attracting companies that could be served by a well-educated labor force. That could leave

behind lesser-skilled immigrant workers.

"A lot of people come to this country with language issues. Also, the skill levels an immigrant has are more appropriate for another economy," McGuigan said.

A large task for city organizers is to help elevate the skill levels of the immigrant population to meet the needs of this changing economic climate. This means more training must be available and encouraging Hispanic youth to attain college degrees.

Although skill levels may not meet the needs of the city yet, the Hispanic population has found an entrepreneurial spirit in places like Broad Street.

According to Margurita Guedes, executive director of South Side Broad Street, the number of businesses there grew from about 100 to roughly 300 in 10 years.

"There are a number of bodegas, restaurants and hair salons. There are way too many hair salons. They are easy to open, but hard to maintain," she said.

Other businesses include Ada's Creations, a Broad Street restaurant featuring Dominican cuisine that

opened in February. Its owner, Ada Azelia, worked for five years with city officials to try and open the eatery, she said. But, her broken English impeded her ability to work with city government to get her restaurant off the ground.

There was always paperwork to be done and she lacked a cultural translator who could help her through the permit process.

"At times, I think they don't care about nobody," she said. "But with persistence and patience I kept going. Now I am very happy and all the Hispanic people have been supportive."

The "bad experience" has taught her a number of things about business and she now gives advice to others on strategies to get their own businesses started.

Guedes said her organization's mission is to be a clearinghouse for Hispanic entrepreneurs, providing information on how to navigate the waters of starting a business in the United States.

Her first strategy, she said, is to teach how business is done in the United States to help avoid the difficulties Azelia faced. Guedes said things like drawing up a business plan, understanding promotion and learning marketing skills are essential.

"When people here start a business they have a plan in their head.

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With the census data and the mall, for instance, the perception is that this is a city on the move.

— Patrick McGuigan,  
executive director of Providence Plan



# Broad Street renewal helps energize Hispanic community

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They have to get it down on paper," she said.

Guedes added that immigrants come from a country where bartering was prevalent and business was done on a cart. It's a far cry from the way retailers in the United States function.

She runs courses for entrepreneurs to help them navigate, among other things, the permitting process and renting space.

Another one of her aims is to have businesses organize so that they have a say in how Broad Street takes shape.

"If they do not come together as a group, there will be no forum to express concerns and be heard," she said. "We have to create strategy for community control and revitalization."

This is especially important because property values rose about 14 percent along Broad Street. Guedes fears the immigrants will be pushed from their homes, which will hurt the businesses serving this population.

"I fear that residents and businesses won't have a say," she said. "We have to get people ready to compete when the changing infrastructure of city takes place."

This means lifting the skill levels of Hispanics to meet Providence's economic needs so that they can earn enough to remain in their homes.

McGuigan calls the Broad Street comeback "immense." He said there are very few vacancies as storeowners recognize the profits within these neighborhoods.

"You see a lot of entrepreneurial energy. All these new retailers are providing products to their immediate market," he said.

Bigger players, including Stop & Shop and Shaw's, have also realized the potential of this new audience. Stop & Shop has opened a store in the West End while a Shaw's has opened in Olneyville, the first time a shopping center has opened in that area.

Both offer a different selection of goods aimed at this immigrant population. Although the income in these areas is lower (the 2000 census indicates the average money a family brings in has dropped), the stores are attracted by the density of people in these communities.

Density is also a problem, particularly when affordable housing is concerned.

According to Stephen O'Rourke, executive director of the Providence Housing Authority, while the city's population increased 8 percent, the number of homes in the area increased by 1.6 percent.

"There is a sort of crowding-out effect. Although, it is not all bad news," he said.

There have been a number of nonprofit development corporations looking to meet the housing needs. One is Stop Wasting Abandoned Properties, or SWAP, which has been building homes across the city since 1976.

According to Aaron Kishbaugh, SWAP's community initiatives coordi-

nator, South Providence is running out of abandoned properties to rehab and the group has shifted their aim toward constructing one- and two-family affordable housing units.

To celebrate its 25th year, they embarked on a mission to build 25 homes in 25 months, a goal Kishbaugh said has already been surpassed. SWAP built 10 two-family and 18 single-family homes priced at \$103,500 and \$89,000 respectively.

The aim is to provide housing for residents making 60 percent of the city's average income, which is about \$26,000.

He said building affordable housing is extremely important now particularly since the average price of a home in Providence has reached \$230,000.

"It is very difficult to find affordable housing without taking on a rent burden," he said.

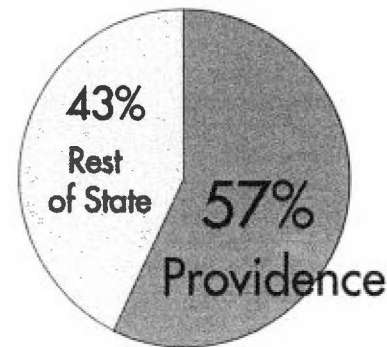
Kishbaugh added, "The Annie E. Casey Foundation found that 44 percent of families are paying more than 30 percent of their incomes on rent."

SWAP has a two-year waiting list for apartments that it rents to families in the South End with an average income of about \$21,600.

Despite programs to help place families in homes and curb debt, Kishbaugh said it is getting very difficult to remain in the city.

"Most of the tenants and residents have 9-to-5 jobs, but they are not making enough to live in Providence," he said.

## Rhode Island's Hispanic Population



Source: 2000 Census data